

SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Carol A. Blackmon

Moderated by Amanda Lyons

Thursday, August 18, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building
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Scope Note: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Rides and to complement the Department's exhibit "*Freedom Rides: Journey for Change*" conducted recording sessions with local citizens to gather oral memories of the Civil Rights Era. The participants were also given the opportunity to have their photograph taken in front of the exhibit. The recordings were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 at the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

LYONS: This is Amanda Lyons, with the Department of Archives and History. Today's date is Thursday, August 18, 2011. This is also recording number 022 for the Speak Now program. And today I have with me Ms. Carol Blackmon who's here to share her memories. Welcome.

BLACKMON: Thank you, Amanda. I'm so happy to be here. So I'll just start right up. I'm originally from Canton. I grew up in rural Madison County, and we always like to say that we are from Canton because that's what our mail said at the...our rural route address.

My early memories of issues related to the Civil Rights Movement are connected to my grandmother and my grandfather—and my father—my family lived on family property so my grandmother, who we called Granny, and my grandfather lived nearby but my grandfather passed early on in my life. And my grandmother and my father would hold conversations all the time about what was going on in the community, the marches that were occurring in Canton, some of the violence that was associated with that, what it really meant in terms of danger to us as black folk, at the time they said Colored. And so the early memories were of Granny talking about her childhood memories of what she called patrollers, no paddy-rollers, but they were actually the hold-overs from the patrol area when black people were being patrolled when they were in places and all that where they should not have been, following the Emancipation Proclamation period and all of that. And fast-forward. I—my—older sister was in elementary school, I believe. I was just a little kid, so I sat home all the time, and I think I always had my ears open. And I remember them talking about going to sign to, to register to vote. And the whole conversation was one around the danger of it and two around the test that would have to take place. And so my grandmother and, and my father were having this conversation and they decided that what they would do would be to keep my sister's Mississippi history book and just pay for the book like it had been lost, so that they would be able to review the Mississippi Constitution, the Preamble and all that and be prepared to take the voter test and whatever the testing was that went along with that. And so I remembered them keeping the book and giving her the money. Didn't remember anything more about that until a few years ago when my family started to convening our family reunions. And so while my brothers were actually conducting the research at Archives and History and talking to family members and all of that, and it followed the, the Sovereignty Commission files release, and there was my grandmother, Alvona Blackmon, listed at Route 2, Box 195, Canton, Mississippi. She and a number of other folk, and I go online and look at it sometimes, when they'd say, "These are the folk who came in on this particular date to register to vote at the Madison County Courthouse," which actually placed them on like a watch list.

And then to go back a bit, when I was in junior high school, Dr. Martin

Luther King and other organizers would come in to Canton on a regular basis and hold Movement meetings and marches and all of that, and I would participate in a summer enrichment program, which allowed me to be in the town of Canton sometimes, staying with my aunt who lived not far from Holy Child Jesus Catholic School, where a lot of the Civil Rights workers would house themselves in tents and all of that. And so I would get to participate in the marches that way. And then a few years later in my junior year in high school, we had a history teacher who was very much interested in not only getting us registered to vote because you could register to vote at the age of 18 at this time—or by that time—and so he recruited a number of students to go out to work in the community to do voter registration recruitment. And so I participated in that and I like to, when I think back about it, I like to think that what I learned sitting on the floor and hiding under the chairs and listening to Daddy and Granny talk about all of this and what it really meant for our people, is what drove me to be a part of that voter registration process. Two or three of my classmates were arrested that day, but arrangements were made to get them out of the Madison County jail.

And then when I became a student at Tougaloo, I would go back out to Canton to do some poll watching and that kind of thing, and with one of our instructors there, who, well, Tougaloo is in Madison County, but Canton is the county seat, so to do any significant work, they felt that we needed to go to Canton to do it. So they would pile us in the car and, you know, I think it was illegal the number of students who would be piled in there, but we would go up and do whatever work that they asked us to do and standing, watching to see if people were being intimidated on election day, voting ourselves first of all, and, and then trying to figure out what other things we could do that were low cost, no cost, or minimally threatening that we could do to, to help people become registered to vote.

And then later on I started to work for the Children's Defense Fund here in Mississippi. And as a result, I got to meet a number of Freedom Riders, trailblazers who were on Eyes of the Prize, who were involved with the early sixties movements with the three Civil Rights workers, and finally to participate with the Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement in their early organizational days. And, you know, it's, I guess kinda funny that we met out at Tougaloo College because not only was that where I had gone to college, but it was the place that—where—I learned that the Civil Rights workers were welcomed. And so over a number of years, they lived there, would come in to make speeches, would organize and have other people come in to gain information. And so for a number of months or a couple of years, I was involved in the early organizational work of the Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement. And to this day, I remain on the mailing list.

LYONS:

Well, I had one question.

BLACKMON: Okay.

LYONS: Did you attend a segregated school? I don't know if you were...

BLACKMON: Uh, huh. Yeah, I forgot that part. I did attend a segregated school. I attended the Canton Separate School District, so there was one district for—one school for—the black children and one for the white children. The school for the white children was called Canton High School or the Canton School District. My school was called Rogers High School, the high school that I attended. Of course, I started to school at Cameron Street Elementary, which was the black school. And then I went on to junior high which was Rogers Elementary School, which was named after the African-American black schools superintendent, Dr. Rogers. And so my junior year actually, and I graduated in 1970 in May of 1970, my junior year in high school, I believe, the school system there was integrated. And as a part of that integration process Rogers High School became the high school for the City of Canton, the name was changed to Canton High School. So I was the last, part of the last class of the Rogers High School graduating class.

LYONS: Okay, now that's unusual to have the White high school move into what had been the Black high school, right?

BLACKMON: It was unusual.

LYONS: Usually it was vice-versa.

BLACKMON: Uh, huh. And I think it happened because we had the newer school.

LYONS: Oh.

BLACKMON: The White school was a much older building that I think is, that may be on the historic records now because of the age of it. And of course there was the integration before where there were a hand full of black students who had gone over to the white school, but that was like in the mid sixties, but by my time, they integrated and we became Canton High School, and today the system is called Canton High School. When we were integrated a few of the white teachers came over. I remember one was the ROTC instructor. So the other thing that happened was the ROTC instructor and the few other teachers who came over, brought their children into the system that was majority black. There were, so there were—we were—my class had just over 200 students, my graduating class had, which had been the largest graduating class for Rogers High School. And there were maybe four to five white students who were a part of the high school at that time.

- LYONS: So, did some of the, did most of the white students stay at the old high school then?
- BLACKMON: No. Like across the state, the academy system was incorporated or instituted there, so the white students all went to what was called Canton Academy.
- LYONS: Okay. And the other question I had thought of was you mentioned your grandmother trying to register to vote. Did she succeed in that or what, what was her experience?
- BLACKMON: She did succeed. I don't know her entire experience but I do know that she talked about how they were treated when they went in to register to vote, how it was a not a comfortable experience at all, how mean the people were to them, that they were, they never knew what questions would be asked as part of, I think they called it, "The Poll Test." And I think that they also paid like a, some sort of registration fee. And I don't remember, because, keep in mind I was maybe six years old, so I don't remember that level of detail, but I do remember that it was a scary time and that they would always caution us to be careful. We, where we lived was very sparsely populated at the time and we were on the family property. It was really dark at night because we didn't have all of the street lights and the way the people do now in rural communities, so we were pretty much always scared, I think.
- LYONS: Really?
- BLACKMON: Yes.
- LYONS: Okay. Well did you have anything else you wanted to share with us today?
- BLACKMON: I think the other thing that I remember is growing up in such a separate community that I had very little interaction with white people, as we say it. There were a couple white farmers who had property across the road from where we lived, so we saw them. Before I started to elementary school I remember seeing the white students going to school on the bus, while my sister and my brother went to the school at, at our church, at Mary Grove Church. There were two little buildings, little wood framed buildings that sat on the grounds at the church, it's, it's out on Rankin Road. Of course, those buildings are gone. They either walked to school, which was maybe a mile and a half, or my father drove 'em, during bad weather or sometimes one of the other parents would stop to pick 'em up if they saw them walking, that kind of thing. And when I started to school, however, all of those kids had then gone into Canton, into that school system, and then we had a bus to ride. And so my brother, who was two years older, had started in what they called pre-primer, and so I'm thinking maybe that was like pre-kindergarten? No one has ever verified that, though. And when I started, I

went straight into first grade. And a few years ago I became really involved with...with my school reunion activities. And as a part of that, two years ago one of the graduating classes began organizing a effort, like around African American, recognizing all of the African American schools that were in the Canton area from 1939 up until 1989. And so that was the first time that I actually saw photos of those little school buildings that were on the grounds at my church. And I still attend that church even though I live here in Jackson now. And I think it's really exciting what this group is trying to do. I call it the Canton All-School Reunion Group. I can't remember what the formal name of it is. But I think it's so commendable what they're trying to do is to actually document the history of how public education evolved for African-American students in that area and, and across different eras. And one of the intents is to actually write a history around that, and to build...a scholarship fund to give back to public education in Canton.

LYONS:

Okay. Well, thank you.

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